



A Study of the Content of King Lý Thái Tổ's "Chiếu Dời Đô" (Edict on the Transfer of the Capital)

Le Thi Ngan

Triệu Sơn 4 High School, Thanh Hóa Province, Vietnam

* Corresponding Author: **Le Thi Ngan**

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Abstract

The Chiếu dời đô (Edict on the Transfer of the Capital) composed by King Lý Thái Tổ in 1010 is far more than an administrative proclamation announcing the relocation of the capital from Hoa Lư to Đại La. Embedded within this seminal document is a comprehensive political vision that reflects the aspirations of a nation emerging from centuries of foreign domination and internal fragmentation. The edict articulates the strategic foresight of an enlightened ruler, one who recognized the necessity of choosing a capital capable of supporting long-term political stability, economic growth, and cultural flourishing. By invoking historical precedents from the Shang and Zhou dynasties, the text situates Đại Việt within the broader East Asian intellectual tradition while simultaneously asserting the legitimacy and maturity of the newly founded Lý dynasty. Moreover, the edict serves as an indirect yet powerful declaration of a new national trajectory. It proclaims the rise of a vigorous dynasty, capable of transforming Đại Việt from a polity reliant on natural fortifications into a confident and outward-looking kingdom. The relocation to Đại La - later renamed Thăng Long - symbolizes a decisive shift from defensive isolation to strategic openness, marking the beginning of a period of unprecedented prosperity and cultural development. Above all, the Chiếu dời đô affirms the determination of the Vietnamese people to assert their sovereignty and chart their own destiny. It stands as a timeless testament to national resilience, political wisdom, and the enduring aspiration for a flourishing and stable state.

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1. Introduction

The Chiếu dời đô (Edict on the Transfer of the Capital) composed by King Lý Thái Tổ in 1010 occupies a foundational place in Vietnamese political thought and literary history. As both a state document and a work of persuasive political discourse, the edict marks a pivotal moment in the shaping of Đại Việt's imperial identity. Far beyond its administrative purpose of announcing the relocation of the capital from Hoa Lư to Đại La, the text articulates a strategic vision for national development rooted in historical precedent, geographical rationality, and dynastic legitimacy.

In contemporary Vietnamese education, the edict has been included in Grade 8 Literature textbooks under the new general education curriculum, particularly in the series Kết nối tri thức với cuộc sống and Cánh diều. However, textbook treatments tend to emphasize reading skills rather than a substantive exploration of the text's historical and ideological dimensions.

As a result, students may encounter the edict as a literary artifact without fully appreciating its intellectual depth, political implications, or historiographical value.

This article seeks to address that gap by examining the content of the Chiếu dời đô through an interdisciplinary lens, drawing on both textual analysis and historical scholarship. By situating the edict within the broader context of East Asian political traditions and the specific circumstances of early 11th-century Đại Việt, the study aims to elucidate the strategic considerations and philosophical underpinnings that informed Lý Thái Tổ's decision. The findings not only enrich the academic understanding of the text but also support more comprehensive and contextually grounded classroom instruction.

2. Methodology

This study employs a qualitative and interdisciplinary research methodology grounded in textual analysis, historical contextualization, and comparative evaluation. The approach combines perspectives from literary studies, historiography, and political theory to provide a comprehensive understanding of the Chiếu dời đô and its intellectual significance.

First, the research utilizes close reading techniques to examine the linguistic structure, rhetorical strategies, and stylistic features of the edict. Particular attention is given to parallel prose conventions, persuasive devices, and the use of historical references within the text. This method allows for a detailed interpretation of the work's underlying arguments and aesthetic qualities.

Second, a historical-contextual approach is employed to situate the edict within the socio-political environment of early 11th-century Đại Việt. Archival sources - such as the Đại Việt sử ký toàn thư and related historical documents - are used to reconstruct the conditions that shaped Lý Thái Tổ's decision to relocate the capital. This method highlights how geographical, political, and dynastic factors informed the content and purpose of the edict.

Third, the study involves comparative historical analysis, drawing parallels between Chinese political traditions and Vietnamese statecraft. By examining references to the Shang and Zhou dynasties, the research clarifies how Lý Thái Tổ strategically employed classical East Asian political discourse to legitimize his decision. This comparative lens enhances the understanding of Đại Việt's intellectual integration into the broader Sinosphere.

Fourth, elements of political discourse analysis are applied to assess how the edict constructs authority, articulates national identity, and promotes collective consensus. This framework illuminates the ways in which Lý Thái Tổ used language to reshape perceptions of national destiny, governance, and the role of the populace.

Finally, the research synthesizes insights from modern scholarship, including contemporary historiographic interpretations and educational analyses found in recent literature textbooks. This ensures that the study bridges traditional sources with current academic perspectives.

Through this integrated methodology, the study achieves a multi-dimensional understanding of the Chiếu dời đô, revealing both its literary artistry and its profound

contributions to Vietnamese political thought.

3. Research Content

3.1. The Emergence of the Work

The origins of the Chiếu dời đô are closely intertwined with the political, geographical, and dynastic conditions of early 11th-century Đại Việt. According to the Đại Việt sử ký toàn thư (Complete Annals of Đại Việt), in the first year of the Thuận Thiên reign (1010), King Lý Thái Tổ found the Hoa Lư citadel - nestled among limestone mountains and surrounded by waterways - unsuitable for sustaining the long-term development of an imperial capital. Its dampness, limited space, and defensive but confining terrain no longer corresponded to the aspirations of a newly established dynasty seeking consolidation and expansion.

Perceiving these constraints, Lý Thái Tổ resolved to relocate the capital and personally composed the Chiếu dời đô. His ministers, recognizing the strategic importance of the decision, affirmed that the relocation would "secure long-term prosperity for the imperial enterprise above and ensure the flourishing of the populace below." In the seventh month of autumn, the king departed from Hoa Lư for Đại La. When a golden dragon appeared beneath the royal barge upon arrival, the citadel was auspiciously renamed Thăng Long - "Ascending Dragon" - a symbolic gesture reflecting both divine approval and political optimism.

From a historiographical perspective, the edict emerged not merely as an administrative announcement but as an embodiment of the Lý dynasty's political vision. The decision to relocate was grounded in empirical observation and strategic calculation, reflecting the king's recognition that a new stage in national development required a new center of governance. The edict captures this vision in its reference to "creating a long-term plan for future generations," a prophecy ultimately fulfilled as Thăng Long became the enduring capital of successive dynasties - Trần, Later Lê, Mạc, and Restored Lê - and remains the capital of contemporary Vietnam.

Thus, the Chiếu dời đô represents the convergence of practical governance, historical awareness, and symbolic statecraft. It signals the transition of Đại Việt from a polity dependent on natural fortifications to a confidently expanding kingdom, and it lays the foundation for the cultural and political flourishing that would define Thăng Long for nearly a millennium.

3.2. Content of the Edict

Although the Chiếu dời đô appears at first glance to be a succinct administrative decree announcing the transfer of the capital from Hoa Lư to Đại La, a comprehensive analysis reveals it to be an intricate political document that synthesizes historical reasoning, geographical assessment, ideological rhetoric, and dynastic self-fashioning. The edict operates simultaneously on multiple layers: it legitimizes a major political transformation, articulates a strategic developmental vision, consolidates dynastic authority, and delineates a new conception of nationhood. Read through the lens of political discourse and historical statecraft, the text emerges as a landmark articulation of early Đại Việt's geopolitical consciousness.

3.2.1. Historical Continuity and Lessons from the Past

The opening passage - citing the Shang and Zhou dynasties - situates Lý Thái Tổ within the East Asian tradition of sage kingship, where a ruler's legitimacy is measured not only by lineage but also by his capacity to interpret and adapt to historical cycles. In classical political philosophy, particularly within the Confucian canon, the emulation of antiquity (pháp cổ) serves as a principal mode of political legitimation. By invoking Pan Geng and King Cheng, Lý Thái Tổ demonstrates erudition and aligns himself with rulers who brought renewal through decisive action.

The reference to the longevity of these dynasties underscores a principle deeply embedded in East Asian political thought: long-lasting dynasties achieve harmony between Heaven's mandate, geographical conditions, and human affairs (thiên thời - địa lợi - nhân hòa). Lý Thái Tổ deploys this triadic framework implicitly, suggesting that relocation is not merely a policy decision but a cosmically sanctioned act.

The critique of the Đinh and Early Lê dynasties operates as a rhetorical counterpoint. By portraying their refusal to relocate as a violation of Heaven's will and a neglect of the people's welfare, the edict frames capital relocation as the morally correct alternative. This dual historical model - foreign exemplars of wisdom versus domestic instances of failure - creates a persuasive narrative that binds historical determinism with political necessity, thus strengthening the authority of the decision.

Furthermore, the edict implicitly advances a philosophy of adaptive governance. In citing historical precedents, Lý Thái Tổ communicates that political institutions must evolve in response to environmental and social conditions. In this sense, Chiếu dời đô functions as an early Vietnamese theorization of statecraft grounded in historical pragmatism.

3.2.2. Strategic Vision and Geopolitical Insight

The edict's detailed description of Đại La reveals a sophisticated understanding of urban planning, infrastructure, and regional integration. The characterization of the site as "the center of heaven and earth" does not simply reflect geomantic beliefs but also anticipates its role as a central node in transportation and communication networks. The accessibility to river routes, the fertile surrounding plains, and the balanced terrain make Đại La ideal for sustaining a growing population and for enabling economic expansion - a central concern of every premodern empire.

In emphasizing that the land is "spacious and level, high and well-ventilated," the king adopts a proto-urbanist perspective, aligning the selection of the capital with principles of sustainability, defense, and administrative efficiency. His assessment of Đại La as a place where "all directions converge" indicates an early recognition of regional dynamics: a capital located at the geographic heart of the country could more effectively monitor frontier regions, facilitate trade flows, and maintain political cohesion.

This strategic vision also embodies an ideological shift. Hoa Lu, the birthplace of independence following centuries of Chinese domination, symbolized resistance and survival. By contrast, Đại La - situated along major trade arteries and more exposed to northern influence - symbolizes openness, confidence, and diplomatic dialogue. Thus, the relocation signals a repositioning of Đại Việt within the broader East Asian sphere: not merely as a defensive polity but as an

emerging regional actor.

Additionally, the edict anticipates the long-term role of Thăng Long as a cultural and intellectual center. By choosing a site favorable to population growth and economic development, Lý Thái Tổ lays the groundwork for the flourishing of arts, scholarship, Buddhism, and administrative institutions that later reached their zenith under the Lý and Trần dynasties.

3.2.3. Assertion of Dynastic Authority and National Strength

One of the most significant ideological functions of the edict is its projection of dynastic identity. In moving from a rugged, defensible terrain to a broad and open plain, Lý Thái Tổ conveys a message of confidence: the Lý dynasty does not rely on natural barriers to maintain sovereignty. This transition marks an essential reconfiguration of power: from a fragile political arrangement dependent on geography to a consolidated regime built on institutional strength.

In this context, Thăng Long becomes a symbolic space - a stage for displaying the maturity of the dynasty. The edict thus performs a dual political function: it communicates to domestic subjects that the new dynasty is capable of stewarding national destiny, and it signals to neighboring powers, especially Song China, that Đại Việt now occupies a firmer, more assertive position in regional geopolitics.

Historical parallels reinforce this interpretation. When Hồ Quý Ly later relocated the capital back to a fortified site, it was widely understood as a retreat into defensive insecurity. Similarly, the Later Lê's immediate return to Thăng Long following their victory over the Ming reestablished the capital as a symbol of legitimacy and national resilience.

Moreover, the edict's rhetorical structure subtly positions the Lý dynasty as the rightful successor to a historical mission: to stabilize the kingdom and elevate its prestige. In doing so, the text transforms the capital relocation into a performative act of statecraft and sovereignty.

3.2.4. The People's Participation in Shaping the Nation's Future

The closing lines of the edict - inviting ministers to deliberate - go beyond mere courtesy. They serve as a rhetorical device to portray the king as a benevolent ruler whose policies align with the collective will. Although the monarch retains ultimate authority, this gesture marks an important development in political communication: the symbolic inclusion of the populace in decisions concerning national destiny.

In the Confucian political tradition, good governance requires harmony between ruler and people. By soliciting opinions, Lý Thái Tổ enacts this ideal, positioning the relocation not as a unilateral act but as a shared responsibility. The invocation of "the people's will" (dân ý) elevates the edict from a command to a collaborative vision for national development. Hoàng Cao Khải's commentary highlights the political sophistication underlying this gesture: by invoking both divine approval and popular consent, the king binds society together during a transformative period. This inclusive rhetoric strengthens the legitimacy of the relocation and fosters unity during the early years of the Lý dynasty.

In modern terms, this aspect of the edict may be understood as an early form of participatory political discourse - a recognition that nation-building requires not only strategic

insight but also social cohesion.

4. Conclusion

The Chiếu dời đô stands as one of the most significant documents in Vietnamese political and literary heritage. Although formally categorized as an administrative edict, the text transcends its functional purpose to emerge as a masterful piece of parallel prose (biền văn) that integrates historical reasoning, political vision, and aesthetic sophistication. It is a rare example in which statecraft and literary artistry converge to articulate a transformative moment in the nation's development.

Through its carefully structured arguments, the edict presents a panoramic view of Thăng Long's geographical and strategic advantages. Lý Thái Tổ's rich and evocative language renders the city not merely as a physical space but as a symbolic locus of prosperity, stability, and cultural flourishing. The attention to địa lợi (geographical advantage) and nhân hòa (social harmony) reflects a deep engagement with classical East Asian concepts of governance, while simultaneously adapting them to the specific historical and environmental conditions of Đại Việt.

More significantly, the edict represents a political declaration of national aspiration. It articulates a vision of sustainable and long-lasting statehood grounded in strategic urban planning, historical consciousness, and institutional consolidation. By justifying the relocation through references to ancient dynasties, critiques of previous Vietnamese rulers, and detailed analysis of Đại La's terrain, the text demonstrates a remarkable synthesis of moral authority and pragmatic governance. The king's stated goal of establishing a foundation "for ten thousand generations" resonates as both a political commitment and a civilizational ambition.

The relocation to Thăng Long set into motion a millennium-long trajectory of cultural, political, and economic development. The capital became not only the administrative heart of successive dynasties but also a vibrant center of intellectual life, Buddhism, education, and diplomacy. The success of this transformation affirms the accuracy of Lý Thái Tổ's strategic judgment and highlights the edict's enduring relevance as a testament to visionary leadership.

Beyond its historical impact, the Chiếu dời đô offers valuable insights for contemporary research in literature, political theory, urban studies, and historiography. Its interplay between rhetoric and governance provides a compelling example of how political texts can shape collective identity and national destiny. As a literary work, it showcases the expressive potential of classical prose and enriches the canon of Vietnamese intellectual history.

Ultimately, the Chiếu dời đô must be recognized not merely as a document marking the relocation of a capital, but as a foundational articulation of Đại Việt's state identity - a declaration of the nation's resilience, confidence, and aspiration toward long-term prosperity. It remains a landmark text that encapsulates the wisdom of Lý Thái Tổ and the enduring ideal of building a prosperous, enduring, and culturally vibrant nation

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